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ABSTRACT

Information about the mature student in tertiary institutions in Australia was obtained in a 1976 survey. Responses from 98 institutions provided information on whether there were special entry schemes or other methods of entry for mature aged applicants, the selection procedures, the number of mature aged entrants in 1976, and the courses in which they were enrolled. Nearly all institutions have some relaxed entry provisions for mature aged students. Some have used existing provisions within their regulations to allow mature aged students to enter while others have introduced special schemes. A number of institutions have set separate quotas for these students. This action has removed them from competition with normal aged students and therefore made their entry independent of the supply of normal aged students. Selection methods usually involve multiple procedures, such as special tests, interviews, work references or experience, and academic background. Although institutions were not asked specifically about performance, 27 percent offered such information. Fourteen institutions stated that mature aged students performed better than normal aged students, and 12 stated that they performed just as well, and one stated that they had a higher dropout rate. (SW)

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MATURE AGE STUDENTS IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Higher Education Advisory and Research Unit.

MATURE AGE STUDENTS

IN

TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Please note: Contained inside the back cover is a microfiche of tables 4 - 7 summarising replies received from 98 tertiary institutions throughout Australia. Xerox copies may be purchased from the Unit.

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INTRODUCTION

Although tertiary education appears to be entering a steady state era, there remains at least one area of major growth - the enrolment of mature age students. As an example, at Monash University the percentage of the first year intake 25 and over has grown from about 5% in 1970 to about 12% in 1975 (Slamowicz, Smurthwaite and West, 1976) and grew further to 13.5% in 1976. The growth is even more spectacular when considered on a Faculty basis. In the Arts and Law intakes, the percentages 25 and over were 9.6% and 4.2% respectively in 1970, and 27.7% and 29.3% in 1976.

A few Australian studies have investigated mature age students in particular institutions (e.g. van Helden, 1975) although amongst these there has been a tendency to concentrate on special groups of unqualified applicants, usually called "early leavers" which include some mature age students (e.g. Barrett, 1976). The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (1975) has also conducted a survey of special admissions in Universities.

In the present study an attempt was made to obtain an overview of the phenomenon of mature age student enrolment in tertiary institutions throughout Australia. The survey covers all types of tertiary institutions and describes the situation in late 1976.

In all 107 tertiary institutions were approached. (Tertiary institutions listed in Directory of Tertiary Courses 1976 with the exception of a few judged as inappropriate). Responses have been obtained from 98 institutions.¹ The survey asked for information on

- whether the institution had special entry schemes or other methods of entry for mature aged applicants?
- what were the selection procedures?

¹ In 1977 all institutions were sent a copy of the Interim Report and asked to check their entry for errors. Corrections have been incorporated in this Report.

- the number of mature age entrants in 1976?
- the courses in which they were enrolled?

SUMMARY OF REPLIES

A summary of the replies for each institution is given in Tables 4 to 7. Institutions are classified according to Universities, Colleges of Advanced Education, Teachers' Colleges and Single-purpose institutions. The State Colleges of Victoria were included among the Teachers' Colleges although their equivalent institutions in other states tend to be C.A.E.'s. However the division is merely a matter of convenience and is not intended to imply difference. It must be emphasised that these Tables impose a structure on the responses and so involve some loss of information and perhaps some distortion. This is the price we must pay for reducing the responses to a form that aids comparison and interpretation. Even so, the Tables run to many pages. To further reduce the data to allow an overview to be gained, Tables 1 to 3 have been produced. These "summaries of the summaries" must be seen for what they are - an attempt to give a general overview. The categories are artificial and lead to considerable distortion of the original responses in some instances. However they provide general outlines that are reasonably accurate. Readers are encouraged to consult the detailed Tables (4 to 7) to fill out these outlines.

One other general word of caution is needed. There are various interpretations of mature age students. The two main divisions are "over 21" and "25 and over", but other definitions are used. Some institutions admit, under special provisions, entrants who have had at least two years break from school - and classify them as "mature age students". In Tables 1 to 3 the term mature age students is used very

loosely to include those groups that are interpreted as such by their institutions. Tables 4 to 7 give details of the actual definition used by each institution (where it is known).

REQUIREMENTS FOR ENTRY

Nearly all institutions have some relaxed entry provisions for mature age students. Of these, some have used existing provisions within their regulations to allow mature age students to enter (i.e. not as normal entrants) while others have introduced special schemes. Table 1 summarises the minimum requirement route available to all mature students. The categorization of "minimum ... to all mature students" means that the Monash Early Leavers Scheme, for example, would not be considered under the "no HSC required" category as it is not an avenue available to all mature age students.

TABLE 1: CATEGORISATION OF MINIMUM ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

(AVAILABLE TO ALL POTENTIAL MATURE AGE ENTRANTS)

	UNIVERSITIES (N=19)	C.A.E.'s & TEACHERS' COLLEGES (N=65)	SINGLE PURPOSE COLLEGES (N=14)
Full HSC required	0	3	3
Part HSC required (or recognised equivalents)	10	1	0
No HSC required	7	49	10
No HSC required but MUST NOT have attempted HSC	2	12	1

The greater relative frequency of the "No HSC required" in the C.A.E.'s and Teachers' Colleges was not surprising. It was surprising that we had to add a sub-category of "No HSC required" - in which HSC must not have been attempted. The logic of this position is not readily interpretable.

SELECTION METHODS

Selection methods vary considerably and usually involve multiple procedures (e.g. Special test plus interview). Table 2 provides a summary of the methods that are used in selection - thus 10 Universities use special tests as part of their selection method.

TABLE 2: FREQUENCY OF USE OF VARIOUS METHODS IN (AT LEAST)
PART OF THE SELECTION OF MATURE AGE STUDENTS

	UNIVERSITIES (N=19)	C.A.E.'s & TEACHERS' COLLEGES (N=65)	SINGLE PURPOSE COLLEGES (N=14)
Scores on part HSC or equivalent	9	2	0
Special tests	10	37	3
Interview	5	44	5
Work references or experience	6	28	4
Certain academic background	5	24	7

NUMBERS OF MATURE AGE STUDENTS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

Numbers of mature age students expressed as proportions of the total are given in Table 3. Not all respondents gave numbers and some only gave the numbers in specific courses. It should be remembered that different institutions use different definitions of mature age students

and so this summary needs to be interpreted with some care. The number of institutions which gave no response in this section prevents any real estimate of the extent of mature age involvement. The overall figures tend to hide high incidence in some areas. The growth figures at Monash (Slamowicz, Smurthwaite and West, 1976) certainly indicate continued growth in that institution. A detailed study of the growth rates and projections for the future is urgently needed for planning in tertiary institutions.

TABLE 3: NUMBERS OF MATURE AGE STUDENTS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

	UNIVERSITIES	C.A.E.'s & TEACHERS' COLLEGES	SINGLE PURPOSE COLLEGES
No Response	13	28	5
0 - 5%	2	5	3
6 - 10%	2	16	3
11 - 15%	1	6	0
16% +	1	8	0
Not applicable	0	3	3

PERFORMANCE

Institutions were not asked specifically about performance, so it is important to note that 27 (27%) of the respondents actually offered information about performance. Some of these responses were impressions, some were based on formal comparisons. Even in the latter case there is danger in attributing any difference to the age of the students since usually they are selected in a different way from normal students and so any difference may simply be a function of the different selection methods.

However, the comments are important as they reflect the attitude of the institutions towards the performance of the students. Of the 27 who made comments, 14 stated that mature students performed better than normal students, 12 stated that they performed just as well and one stated that they had a higher drop out rate. There was one other negative comment which stated that mature age students tended to have higher absenteeism and poorer punctuality. There were also a number of comments to the effect that mature age students had a positive influence on classes etc.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Although this study is primarily descriptive, it is possible to make some speculative inferences. Is it reasonable to see the initial move towards acceptance of mature age students into tertiary institutions being based on supply/demand consideration? The greater "openness" of C.A.E.'s to mature age students (Table 1) is consistent with this proposition.

However it seems that some institutions have adopted a positive commitment to mature age students because of their good performance and/or influence on the institution (i.e. their "success" as students). The reaction of these institutions is now based on demand/success considerations - i.e. while the demand exists they will continue to accept students irrespective of supply considerations. As evidence of this, a number of institutions have now set separate quotas for these students (i.e. they have removed them from competition with normal students and therefore made their entry independent of supply of normal students). Some have stated that they intend to increase their intake because of their success (e.g. University of Adelaide) and one institution actually claims to give preference to mature age students (Macquarie University).

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